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FM AMEMBASSY SUVA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1230

INFO RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2235

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000189

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: C O R R E C T E D C O P Y SUVA 176 AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH FORMER PM CHAUDHRY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On May 7, I met with former prime minister and Fiji Labor Party (FLP) leader Mahendra Chaudhry. We discussed the situation in Fiji following the abrogation of its constitution and possible ways forward. He said that recent events amounted to a lost opportunity for the interim government.

¶2. Chaudhry supports amnesty for de facto Prime Minister Bainimarama if he withdraws from the political scene and allows for a coalition government to lead the country to elections. He responded favorably to my suggestion to meet with deposed PM Laisenia Qarase but said it should be a one-on-one meeting so they could resolve their longstanding differences. End summary.

ABROGATION, A LOST OPPORTUNITY

¶2. (SBU) On May 7, I met with former prime minister and FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry to discuss the situation in Fiji following the abrogation of its constitution as well as possible future steps to return the country to democratic governance. Chaudhry said he was disappointed with de facto PM Frank Bainimarama's actions and saw the circumstances surrounding abrogation as a lost opportunity. He was concerned that there is little chance the President's Political Dialogue Forum (PPDF) can now go forward, which effectively ends what had been a viable process for all political parties. He stressed that President Iloilo's act, instigated by Bainimarama, not only abrogated the Constitution, but broke the Peoples Charter as well. Despite Bainimarama's declared intention to lead the country to elections in 2014, Chaudhry opined that the de facto government would be unable to promulgate a new order, call for elections or hold elections with any legitimacy without the inclusion of all political parties. He told me he plans to send a letter to Bainimarama telling him that he has lost credibility with the Fijian people.

THE WAY FORWARD

¶3. (SBU) Looking forward, Chaudhry said Bainimarama should immediately lift all restrictions on the press and the right to assemble. He must also allow a dialogue to begin among the political parties where they can come to agreement on a mutually acceptable path back to democracy. The de facto government should have a representative at these talks, but he insisted that it should not be the de facto Attorney General. Bainimarama should not try to

manage the dialogue process and should concentrate on running the government. Chaudhry added that, to do this more effectively, Bainimarama must shed some of his portfolios. (Note: Concurrently Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, National Planning, Public Service, People's Charter for Change and Progress, Information, Sugar, Foreign Affairs, International Co-operation and Civil Aviation, Indigenous and Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Provincial Development and Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces [RFMF]. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) In Chaudhry's vision once the political parties come to agreement on a broad framework, the UN and Commonwealth could then be brought back to help with the preparations for elections and to draft appropriate changes to the Constitution. He suggested, as have other opposition leaders, that the new constitution could include a provision allowing amnesty for Bainimarama and the RFMF on condition that they return permanently to the barracks. Once the new constitution has been agreed upon, Bainimarama and the de facto government should hand over power to a coalition government that would prepare for elections by 2011.

WILLING TO WORK WITH QARASE

¶5. (SBU) Noting that his vision was similar to deposed PM Laisenia Qarase's (SEPTEL), I suggested that the two meet.. Chaudhry told me that he is willing to meet with Qarase one-on-one to resolve their longstanding differences before beginning any political process. Even if this initial meeting turns out to be more symbolic than substantive, it would be an improvement over their previous relationship as Chaudhry refused to meet with Qarase while serving in the former Prime Minister's cabinet.

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COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) Chaudhry is clearly in favor of continuing some form of the political leader's dialogue that was taking place before the abrogation but this time without Bainimarama's interference to obtain a pre-determined outcome. With so many similarities now between the visions outlined by Chaudhry and Qarase, I see there might be a real opportunity for the two to help resolve the current political impasse. However, it seems uncharacteristically naive of Chaudhry to imagine a political process in which Bainimarama allows genuine dialogue. Bainimarama also would likely react negatively to cooperation between Chaudhry and Qarase, which he would see as undercutting his ability to secure his preferred constitutional arrangements.

MCGANN